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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000435

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SUBJECT: SULUKULE PROJECT PITS ROMA MINORITY AGAINST
ISTANBUL,S NEED TO MODERNIZE

REF: A. ISTANBUL 166
[B](#). 06 ANKARA 06580

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[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary. Following the demolition of large numbers of substandard homes in Istanbul's predominantly ethnic Roma neighborhood Sulukule, most residents remain in the rubble of the partially demolished neighborhood. Roma community leaders contend the municipality is committing a serious human rights violation by destroying the historic area and forcing out its impoverished occupants. The municipal mayor and other contacts defend the project as badly needed urban renewal prior to Istanbul assuming the role in 2010 of European Center of Culture. End Summary.

A "Voluntary" Move under Threat of Expropriation

[1](#)2. (SBU) Located in the shadows of Istanbul's Byzantine walls, Sulukule is home to about 5,000 residents in 680 households, of which an estimated 3,500 are Roma. The municipality began demolishing homes in late 2007 and plans to build 620 faux-Ottoman townhouses in their place as part of a government-funded 100 million YTL (USD 87 million) urban renewal project in preparation for Istanbul's role as the European Center of Culture in 2010 (Ref A). The municipality has offered Sulukule homeowners 50,000 YTL (43,000 USD) for each house. Mustafa Demir, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) mayor of the Fatih municipality that subsumes Sulukule, told us this amount is well above market value of the squalid homes, and could be used toward the 160,000 YTL purchase price of a new home in the renovated neighborhood. Calling Demir's position unrealistic, Sulukule Roman Culture Solidarity and Development Association President Sukru Pankuk said Roma have no way to pay the balance and are being forced from the neighborhood. He argues that the property value of their current homes is far greater than the municipality's offer and will be even greater in the future.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Pankuk explained the Roma homeowners see little choice but to accept the arguably above-market rate being offered by non-resident buyers seeking to ensure a right to purchase a townhouse once the renovation project is complete. Fully 80 percent of them have sold their houses to non-resident buyers for up to 70,000 YTL, while between 10 and 15 residents have sold their properties to the municipality. The Association contends that of 680

households, only 303 have accepted the municipality's suggestion to move to Tasoluk, a non-descript neighborhood 40 kilometers away that has no wage-earning opportunities in traditional Roma activities such as entertainment. Demir, in contrast, told us one-third of the Sulukule population has accepted. The municipality plans to complete the government-sponsored relocation of all (willing) Sulukule residents to Tasoluk by August 20.

Exceptional "Money Making" Opportunity for Residents?

¶4. (SBU) The government contends it has provided Roma residents a positive economic opportunity by removing barriers to purchase the newly- built Sulukule townhouses. Housing board (TOKi) and municipality contacts told us Sulukule residents will have a right to purchase prior to others, won't have to pay taxes or the usual 25 percent down payment, and may extend TOKi's normal 10 year mortgage payment plan to 15 years. Demir endorsed the municipality's plan as a "money maker" for residents, claiming they could find new housing near Sulukule and sublease their Tasoluk units for 500 YTL while paying as little as 250 YTL per month themselves.

¶5. (SBU) Demir told us the project is part of a broader effort to address the proliferation of substandard, and often illegal, housing throughout Istanbul. The expropriation provisions of the Renovation and Utilization of Deteriorated Cultural Properties Act (Act 5366) are a powerful tool for revitalizing such areas, including Roma neighborhoods Ayvansaray, Fener-Balat, and Yenikapi (Ref B). While Demir proudly announced no homes were expropriated in Sulukule, he acknowledges Act 5366 would allow such a measure. The Association claims many land holders sold their property under the implicit threat of expropriation.

Preservation of Cultural Identity

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¶6. (SBU) Demir claims the government is taking sufficient measures to preserve Roma cultural identity. None of the historical sites are representative of the Roma presence as Roma culture manifests itself in temporal activities and not in permanent structures. Regardless, the municipality will send 50 Roma women and an undetermined number of Roma children to vocational schools to be trained to make handicrafts to be used in the renovation of the neighborhood's Ottoman architecture. In addition, the new housing complex will include courtyards for dancing, a formal musical training center, and a small touristic hotel with a horse drawn carriage. The municipality encourages the Roma to apply for positions as carriage drivers and dancer, and to enroll their children in the formal music training center.

¶7. (SBU) Comment: Both sides have valid arguments. Though Roma homeowners will receive a sizeable sum from the municipality for their current properties, the community's move from its historic location threatens its cultural integrity and traditional economic opportunities. Former Sulukule renters will have limited income earning opportunities and a move to a distant suburb will make earning a living even more difficult. However, the Roma's contention that it is a human rights violation for the municipality to expect the Roma to work in any occupation or location other than those they have arguably occupied for centuries is divorced from the realities of life in a major European city in the twenty-first century. End Comment.

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